United Nations E/2018/SR.39

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
28 September 2018

Original: English

2018 session
27 July 2017–26 July 2018
Humanitarian affairs segment

Summary record of the 39th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 21 June, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. Matjila (Vice-President) ..... (South Africa)

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18-10174 (E)

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In the absence of Ms. Chatardova (Czechia), Mr. Matjila (South Africa), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10:15 a.m.

Agenda item 9: Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*)
(A/73/78–E/2018/54)

High-level panel discussion: "Strengthening local capabilities for sustainable outcomes and local resilience — contribution of humanitarian action"

1. **The President** said that the international humanitarian response system had not always kept pace and exercised sufficient flexibility to adapt mechanisms and funding to growing local, national and regional capacities. International engagement should be based on a good understanding of existing local response capacity and critical gaps. It should be predictable, sustainable and suited to the context.

2. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator), moderator, said that the localization agenda had been gaining momentum, especially since the World Humanitarian Summit held in 2016. International humanitarian organizations were beginning to shift towards greater collaboration with national and local actors and to increase their visibility and funding. However, all too often they continued to expect the national and local response to adapt to the international one instead of the other way around. She hoped that the panel discussion would provide insight into how to learn about national and local response structures prior to a crisis; adapt coordination structures, funding and programming to the local context and existing capacity from the earliest stages of response; use momentum on transcending the humanitarian-development divide to strengthen local response systems over the long term; and replicate the good practice of countries helping each other in times of crisis.

3. Delegations could use an online question-and-answer platform to submit and vote on questions for the panellists. The questions with the most votes were the most likely to be answered. Turning to the first panellist, the Secretary-General of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, she asked what lessons could be learned from Afghanistan about fostering local system self-sufficiency and how international actors could best support nationally and locally run programmes.

4. **Ms. Mobarez** (Secretary-General, Afghan Red Crescent Society), panellist, said that the Society was one of the oldest humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan. Although originally a government agency, it had long operated independently. Its adherence to the seven fundamental principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement had enabled it to remain united and to gain and maintain the trust of State and non-State actors alike. Working in cooperation with the State, it went where the State could not, operating mobile health clinics in Kandahar and dispensing polio vaccinations in rebel territories, including those held by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It also had an agreement with the State to treat patients with congenital heart disease.

5. The Society was not publicly funded and relied on support from many sources, including foreign Governments and Islamic social finance. Islamic financing was principally in the form of awqaf (endowments), which it used to operate income-generating businesses that funded many of its activities. The Society knew its gaps and its strengths, and it asked for help when needed. For example, it could build a hospital on its own, but it had turned to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for capacity-building and staffing. The Society could not afford to hire the capable, foreign-educated Afghans who wished to remain in Afghanistan as agents of change. She was grateful to its international partners for employing them in its stead and for their assistance in many other areas. There were reasons for hope in Afghanistan, where she, a woman, was now treated as a trusted partner by all parties. Yet the Society would continue to need the assistance of its partners. To meet their requirements of accountability and transparency, it was currently instituting organizational and management reforms involving, inter alia, a suite of resource planning applications to track spending.

6. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) asked the next panellist, the Director-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection of the European Commission, what more could be done to ensure that international organizations receiving funds adopted approaches that built on existing national and local capacities and reinforced rather than replaced national and local service delivery.

7. **Ms. Pariat** (Director-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, European Commission), panellist, said that the European Union welcomed the efforts of the signatories to the Grand Bargain on humanitarian financing to deliver on their commitment to improve localization, as well as the growing number of civil society organizations that had joined the Network for Empowered Aid Response, to which it contributed. Donors could play a key role in promoting

further progress by investing in local capacities and linking their aid to key policy priorities such as preparedness, early action and resilience. Funding should be based on long-term plans agreed with the local actors, which would require opening a dialogue and addressing issues of acceptance and trust.

8. As the custodians of taxpayer money, donors had a duty to ensure that their donations ended up in the right hands; hence the importance of transparency in how the funds were channelled through international organizations to thousands of local entities. One way of improving transparency was by strengthening international umbrella structures like the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which provided a liaison with local affiliates.

9. Localization could be a catalyst for resilience, not only in areas of conflict such as Afghanistan but also in disaster-prone countries such as Haiti, where improved local disaster preparedness and post-disaster response had helped to limit the impact of Hurricane Matthew. However, improving local preparedness and response had taken many years and was an ongoing process, and the same would be true in other countries.

10. As a cross-cutting challenge, localization was hindered by the current project-based financing and partnership models and would be better served by a more holistic approach. Furthermore, donors needed a better understanding of what was preventing local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national entities from becoming the primary humanitarian responders, which could be gained only through peer-to-peer engagement with local and national actors. Local and national actors must also be included in the assessment of risks and the shaping of approaches to emergency response, recovery and development, which would mean moving towards future-oriented, context-driven, adaptive delivery solutions rooted in sustainable recovery and development. Donors should be able to offer new forms of intervention, more insurance packages, more catastrophe bonds and more shock-absorber solutions. Achieving more resilient solutions would require assessing needs, which their local partners knew better than they did, and thinking outside the box. The European Union stood ready to do its part.

11. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) asked the next panellist, the Head of Operations of the Department for International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, to explain how the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund had supported local agricultural production and the use of local food crops to feed populations across Africa.

12. **Ms. Mathlako** (Head of Operations, Department for International Relations and Cooperation, South Africa), panellist, said that humanitarian assistance was one of the objectives of the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund. Humanitarian projects were designed to benefit both the South African people and the recipients of assistance. For example, to provide food assistance to vulnerable women and children in Lesotho and Swaziland, the Fund had helped smallholder subsistence farmers and small-scale millers in South Africa improve the quality of their crops and flours so that they could be exported through the World Food Programme (WFP). It had also helped South African farmers to diversify. The project had provided dignified humanitarian assistance to neighbouring countries while developing South African local economies.

13. Partnerships with international organizations and local actors were of the utmost importance. In the case of the Lesotho and Swaziland projects, the Fund had partnered with WFP, and in Western Sahara, it was working with the Red Cross. In South Sudan, it would be partnering with local church and mosque groups to provide food assistance to displaced people squatting in Juba, because those groups knew the situation better than anyone else and could provide assistance with dignity. By building capacities, the Fund would ensure that they were able to respond to needs and deliver on assistance once the international players had left.

14. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator), introducing the next panellist, the Chair of the Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council, said that the Council helped to strengthen business resilience by providing a single entry point for the private sector to partner with the national Government and the international response system. She asked the panellist how the international system could better understand existing private-sector capacity before a crisis and what changes international structures could make to give more space to the private sector in an emergency response.

15. **Ms. Hunter** (Chair, Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council), panellist, said that the uncoordinated, inefficient response to the devastation of Tropical Cyclone Winston had led the Connecting Business initiative to partner with the private sector and the Government of Fiji to establish the Council. The Council was grateful to the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance and the United Nations

Development Programme for their support of the initiative, which provided a platform for the private sector to engage with government and non-governmental actors, learn their language and move forward together.

16. More than 85 per cent of businesses in the Pacific were small and medium-sized enterprises. Those companies, which were very vulnerable to disaster, played a key role in small communities as well as in regional supply chains. Given that more than 80 per cent did not have business continuity plans, the Council was partnering with the United States Agency for International Development to develop continuity plans for those enterprises in remote areas of Fiji. The Council had also worked with other partners to build an interactive online toolkit aimed at helping businesses become disaster resilient.

17. It was crucial for non-private-sector actors to understand the multifaceted potential and best use of private-sector support and lay the groundwork for cooperation before disaster struck — by signing memorandums of understanding and long-term agreements, for example. The Council had a seat on the National Disaster Management Committee and a representative in every National Disaster Management Office cluster, and it was working in partnership with them to develop and roll out a national disaster resilience plan.

18. Following Tropical Cyclone Winston, the mobile telecommunications group Digicel had worked with government agencies in Vanuatu and Fiji to conduct surveys in affected areas. Once its mobile telecommunications towers had been back up and running, it had been able to determine how many handset users were on each tower and to push out a questionnaire to help the Government and humanitarian actors assess needs. Digicel continued to work with Governments and the other telecommunications companies to provide disaster-related alerts and education.

19. After Tropical Cyclone Winston, millions of dollars had flowed out of Fiji for disaster relief supplies that could have been used more effectively by local small businesses and communities. To obviate such waste and inefficiency, the Council had worked with WFP to identify the first items needed after a disaster and had then surveyed businesses about their average inventories of those items and where they were kept. Local businesses not only had vast skill sets; they also understood the local values and traditions. Unlike external actors, they could ensure continuity, and they already had a relationship of trust with the Government and the communities.

20. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator), reading from the questions submitted electronically, asked how global coordination and decision-making platforms such as the Council's humanitarian affairs segment could be made more accessible to national and local actors.

21. **Mr. Besson** (Observer for Switzerland) said that his country was working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to facilitate the Grand Bargain work stream. While he did not have an answer to the moderator's question, he would like to share a few thoughts. Humanitarian assistance should be about saving not only people but also their institutions, businesses and economy — a broader goal that required culture change. The humanitarian system tended to think in terms of implementation and to end up talking about local subcontractors, not partners. That was counterproductive. It should embrace civil society, organizational, institutional and human development, internal preparedness and resilience. It should commit predictable funding so that local partners could engage in long-term processes. Given their fiduciary duties, donors tended to shy away from the risks of long-term commitments, but humanitarian assistance was about taking risks. To create a sense of common agency among all actors, donors must handle power inequalities in a way that allowed genuine dialogue: they must become better listeners.

22. **Mr. Wang** Xu (China) said that good disaster prevention, mitigation and relief required international and local management systems; the active participation and support of society and well managed local disaster mitigation efforts. It should be supported by adequate capacity-building and equipment development, strong local leadership and effective early warning systems, early responses and recovery and reconstruction efforts, as well as international cooperation and the exchange of international experiences and lessons learned.

23. China's natural disaster prevention and alleviation plan called for mapping community-level disaster risks, strengthening the development of community disaster contingency plans and drills, improving community stockpiling of emergency supplies and providing better training for community volunteers. China would participate actively in the international dialogue on cooperation, as well as in international efforts to provide developing countries with more human resources, training, emergency simulations or drills and policy and technical advice and to help them to strengthen disaster prevention, mitigation and relief capacities and improve disaster resilience.

24. **Mr. Khane** (Secretary of the Council) said that a statement made earlier in the meeting by the representative of an ActionAid partner, Kids Educational Engagement Project (KEEP), had been struck from the record because KEEP was not accredited.

25. **Ms. Matsumoto** (Japan) said that the Japanese programme Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects offered financial assistance to grassroots projects in 120 countries. Interested organizations should apply directly.

26. **Ms. Gill** (Observer for Australia) said that, in view of what the Council had just heard about the continuity of local private-sector engagement, the motivations for private-sector involvement in resilience and recovery efforts and the importance of small- and medium-sized enterprises for disaster resilience, the humanitarian community should reconsider its thinking about the private sector. Working more directly with local partners created challenges in terms of due diligence and adequate resource management. Unfortunately, donors had a tendency to pass risk on to their intermediaries. Local partners should be free to work to their full capacities without the burden of very strict compliance requirements.

27. Australia was taking steps towards working directly with local NGOs as long-term partners, not contractors. It had identified effective partners and was identifying multi-partnerships. Developing true partnerships required learning and capacity-building on all sides.

28. **Ms. Jackson** (Observer for CARE International) said that she wished to reintroduce the question asked by the representative of ActionAid's Liberian partner KEEP: how could the United Nations system and international NGOs be held to higher standards of transparency and accountability with respect to their Grand Bargain commitments? The question was highly relevant and had been raised by a person who not only was Vice-Chair of the Leadership Council of the Network for Empowered Aid Response but also worked with European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. She would also be interested in specific examples of efforts to seek out partnerships with local women's organizations, which faced additional obstacles to inclusion in the localization agenda.

29. **Mr. Kent** (United States of America) said that he appreciated the honesty of the European Union. As a key donor, the United States faced similar challenges, but it was nevertheless committed to expanding its partnerships with local responders and local and national governments. Regarding the issue of risk transfer, it had partnered with InterAction to conduct research on the transfer of risk between international and local NGOs, which must be fully understood in order to address the challenges of managing and defining risk in complex environments. The United States supported all public-private partnerships that could improve natural disaster resilience.

30. **Mr. Nikoi** (World Food Programme (WFP)) said that WFP had been working diligently to keep its localization commitments under the Grand Bargain and had already far exceeded the minimum of 25 per cent of resources transferred to local actors. It was leveraging technology to assess local needs through the mobile vulnerability analysis and mapping (mVAM) initiative. He would like to hear where progress was being made on the localization agenda, and where more remained to be done.

31. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator), reading from the questions submitted electronically, asked how family policies and intervention strategies targeting the family could improve the humanitarian response, reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience among family members and, second, how donors could ensure that often invisible populations, such as women, widows, older persons and persons with disabilities, were involved in leading local humanitarian response policies and action. However, perhaps the Secretary-General of the Afghan Red Crescent Society could begin by answering the question about efforts to partner with local women's organizations.

32. **Ms. Mobarez** (Secretary-General, Afghan Red Crescent Society) said that the international community had stepped up its support for the Afghan Women's Network, which was an umbrella organization for Afghan women's organizations and lobbied for women's causes. As a result, the network was increasingly able to function effectively on its own.

33. Her own organization, which was part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, provided shelters for war widows and education for orphans. It also operated the only institution in the country for women with mental illness.

34. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) asked the Director-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection of the European Commission what more stakeholders could do to deliver on their Grand Bargain commitments.

35. **Ms. Pariat** (Director-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, European Commission) said that there were three main aspects of localization:

channelling more funds to local partners; increasing the participation of local organizations in needs assessment and response design; and improving the resilience of local systems and local governance through capacity-building. The first aspect was the most complicated for donors, who were accountable for the risks they took with local actors and needed sufficient information to vet them. Because they could not scrutinize millions of local actors themselves, they needed their traditional partners to work more transparently and at least partially vet local partners. With respect to the second aspect, improving the integration of local communities and actors, the Grand Bargain signatories were on the right track and should continue their efforts to include local organizations in needs assessment and response design. For projects relating to the third aspect, the resilience agenda, donors could strengthen the humanitarian and development nexus in order to take advantage of pre-existing relationships between development actors and local organizations and the greater predictability of development funding.

36. One way to make invisible populations more visible was to identify them as a priority in humanitarian funding. That was what the European Union had done in the case of education. In general, it immediately identified how various populations were addressed on agenda issues — not only women and girls but also men and boys — and it would henceforth be paying greater attention to persons with disabilities.

37. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator), reading from the questions submitted electronically, asked how the humanitarian community could ensure that local people were seen not only as a source of knowledge about the local context but also as having inherent capacity to contribute to their communities' betterment.

38. **Ms. Mathlako** (Head of Operations, Department for International Relations and Cooperation, South Africa) said that her department worked directly with local people. For example, in its nutritional assistance programmes, local women were hired and trained to prepare the food, equipping them with skills for the future and enhancing their dignity. Most of the smallholder farmers in its programmes were women, and it had partnered with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) to provide them with financial and literacy skills development. To build resilience to future droughts in Namibia, South African contractors were installing boreholes in partnership with local subcontractors, who were also trained in their operation and maintenance. In South Sudan, local people would be responsible for food distribution and storage as well as project management, for which they would receive training.

39. **The President** said that, first of all, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be central to all discussions of humanitarian issues. It was essential to ensure that countries and regions could move ahead on the 2030 Agenda once temporary relief had ended. Second, in economically or politically integrated regions, humanitarian action should aim to build regional capacity and resilience; for example, items for emergency relief should be inventoried and stockpiled at the regional level. Third, data and information from the previous 50 years could be used to identify patterns and prepare for future disasters. In that connection, it was unfortunate that a speaker's credentials sometimes became an issue, as the woman associated with ActionAid had made a valid point: it should be possible to learn from the past and perhaps benefit from her input in future. Fourth, new financing solutions such as resilience bonds and disaster risk insurance should be explored. Fifth, in conflict situations, every effort should be made to capacitate neutral local organizations so that they could serve as fulcrums in no-go areas. Moreover, donors should have differentiated response plans for conflict and non-conflict situations. Lastly, companies sometimes destroyed surplus production to create markets or maintain prices. Instead, they should be able to donate surpluses to emergency supply warehouses. Perhaps the United Nations humanitarian apparatus could inventory all of the food- and equipment-producing companies and set up a donation bank.

40. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) asked the Chair of the Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council for recommendations on improving coordination with the private sector before a crisis, building private-sector resilience and leveraging private-sector expertise.

41. **Ms. Hunter** (Chair, Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council) said that, because businesses operated on budgets, it was important to give them an idea of what they should budget both to survive a natural disaster and to provide assistance. In addition, companies should be urged to make arrangements with banks for interest holidays on commercial loans so that they could continue to pay their employees if they were completely shut down. They should also be encouraged to take out disaster insurance. As elsewhere, massive numbers of small- and medium-sized enterprises in Fiji were uninsured, and the Disaster Resilience Council allowed the Insurance Council of Fiji to come in and

make presentations to companies on the need for insurance and the options available.

42. It was crucial to understand the private sector's strengths and weaknesses before a disaster by mapping what businesses had available, where it was kept, who they responded to in the event of a disaster and how they responded. Long-term agreements were also important. It all came down to communication and engagement. For that purpose, having an entry point such as the Disaster Resilience Council was key.

43. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) asked the panellists for their final thoughts.

44. **Ms. Hunter** (Chair, Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council) said that there was a need for more private-sector engagement and visibility in all aspects of humanitarian assistance. Inviting representatives of the private sector to participate in the humanitarian affairs segment was a good first step in a long but worthwhile process.

45. **Ms. Pariat** (Director-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, European Commission) said that coordination, trust and culture change were critical. The humanitarian community should review the way it had hitherto provided assistance and should re-evaluate needs, which were changing, as well as how they could be addressed. Indeed, new technologies might make it possible to bypass intermediaries or provide new solutions. The humanitarian community should also seek better ways to include local voices in the preliminary stage of response design, and it should work to bridge the humanitarian-development divide. Lastly, it needed to improve the coordination of humanitarian assistance, perhaps by having fewer coordinating bodies. Streamlining and improving coordination would require culture change on all sides.

46. **Ms. Mathlako** (Head of Operations, Department for International Relations and Cooperation, South Africa) said that, as a fairly new player in the humanitarian space, South Africa looked forward to collaboration with other development partners. It would always embed partnerships, dignity and local community resilience in its development cooperation.

47. **Ms. Mobarez** (Secretary-General, Afghan Red Crescent Society) said that resilience was impossible without development; humanitarian assistance should therefore be based on programmes, not projects. Capacity training should focus on transparency- and accountability-related skills so that local partners could use tools such as the resource planning application to institute changes that would build trust. She had found the recent panel discussions most informative, particularly with regard to public-private partnerships, disaster insurance and regional solutions.

48. **Ms. Mueller** (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator) said that the discussion had reaffirmed the Council's understanding that international engagement should reinforce and not replace national and local systems and leadership. International support should be tailored to the context and based on a knowledge of existing national and local capacity, gaps and capacity-building needs. It was of utmost importance to establish partnerships with local responders before crises in order to assess and strengthen the relevant capacities effectively. Different funding practices, including more direct funding to national and local responders, were also essential.

49. The humanitarian community needed to find better ways to link up with existing local, national and regional efforts and should continue strengthening the capacities of local actors through a mix of short-, medium- and long-term measures. Ultimately, the success of international support was measured not only in lives saved but also in the degree to which local capacities, systems and leadership were strengthened.

50. **The President** said that the Council had heard practical examples of how international humanitarian actors could better understand existing national and local coordination and response structures before a crisis. It had heard how the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund had focused on supporting food production, thereby growing the economy in the long term. It had learned lessons from Afghanistan about how donors and international partners could strengthen and support local partners in conflict situations, and about the importance of supporting local women's civil society organizations and giving them a voice in decision-making processes. It had heard how essential it was for international responders to support and use private-sector capacities and networks to prepare for and respond to crises. And, lastly, it had heard about the importance of funding local and national partners and supporting their response capacities on a long-term basis. He hoped that the discussion had challenged all present to reconsider how the humanitarian community could bring about the culture change needed to shift towards a more locally and nationally led response.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.